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Author(s): Richard T. Brucher

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Fantasies of Violence: *Hamlet* and *The Revenger's Tragedy*

RICHARD T. BRUCHER

In a world without civil justice, shrewd revengers in the tradition of Kyd's *Hieronimo* create their own, often in ways that imitate or even mock divine justice and that compromise their own moral impulses.¹ Hamlet decides against killing Claudius at prayer because it might send him to heaven. That would be "hire and salary, not revenge" (III.iii.79),² the kind of expeditious killing a "hit" man might perform. Because his father was cut off in the flush of sin, Hamlet vows to take Claudius

about some act
That has no relish of salvation in't—
Then trip him, that his heels may kick at heaven,
And that his soul may be as damned and black
As hell, whereto it goes.

(III.iii.91-95)

The revenge killing requires craft because it must equal the outrage of the original crime and satisfy the revenger's intense feelings. The problem for an audience is that while a diabolically ingenious killing may offend our moral sensibilities, it may also appeal to our fantasies about power, control, and poetic justice in a corrupt world.

Hamlet finally kills Claudius in a damning moment, but not with the aesthetic calculation he promises in the prayer scene. Perhaps "Hamlet does not confuse art and life," a confusion to which most stage revengers succumb, but this does not mean that however much Hamlet "may justify murder to himself, there is no sign that he can bring himself in

Richard T. Brucher, Associate Professor of English at the University of Maine at Orono, has recently published an article on *Titus Andronicus* in *Renaissance Drama* and is writing a book on Elizabethan and Jacobean stage violence.

¹Howard Felperin, *Shakespearean Representation: Mimesis and Modernity in Elizabethan Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1977), p. 167.

²*Hamlet*, ed. Edward Hubler, *The Complete Signet Classic Shakespeare*, ed. Sylvan Barnet (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972). All quotations from Shakespeare are from this edition.

action to face the horror of doing it.”³ The deaths of Polonius, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and Claudius suggest that he can. The distinction between art and life is crucial in *Hamlet*, but it is more important as a stylistic device by which Shakespeare directs and tests an audience’s responses to violent action than as an indication of Hamlet’s redeeming moral character.

The prayer scene severely tests an audience’s attitudes toward murder and revenge. The terrifying logic behind Hamlet’s delay regenerates the conflicting feelings evoked by the Ghost’s report of King Hamlet’s death in I.v. Claudius’s “leperous distillment” coursed through the sleeping king’s body, causing his “wholesome blood” to curdle like sour milk and his skin to erupt with a “vile and loathsome crust” (I.v.64–72). Because we almost feel the poison polluting the king’s body, we at once realize the horror of “Murder most foul, as in the best it is” (27), and desire the swift extermination of the murderer. Yet to see Hamlet stab a praying man in the back would be appalling, especially when neither we nor Hamlet know that Claudius’s prayers are inefficacious.⁴ The impromptu killing would not resolve the dramatic problems and moral issues already raised. We would still be torn by the horror of the sudden killing, the mitigating effect of Hamlet’s passion, and our own desire to see the villain dispatched. Our moral values would conflict with our delight in the way justice is sometimes achieved in popular entertainments, and Shakespeare’s exploration of murder and revenge would not be complete.

Having Hamlet kill Claudius in an ingenious way, crafted to damn the victim’s soul, would not suit Shakespeare’s purpose either. The dramatic problem is not just that such a killing would damn Hamlet as well. The danger, rather, is that a “cheerfully artful and enthusiastically homicidal” hero “would detract from any sense of pity and fear and mystery”⁵ and thus diminish the moral impact of murder. Aesthetic violence assaults human decency, and so may make moral points, but it also celebrates human wit and resourcefulness, and so may obscure the moral points. Just as the revenger may suffer a conflict between an aesthetic pleasure in achieving an artistic murder and the moral callousness resulting from the repeated performance of violent acts, so may the audience be divided against itself by the pleasing spectacle of witty violence

³R. A. Foakes, “The Art of Cruelty: Hamlet and Vindice,” *ShS* 26 (1973): 29, 25.

⁴Eleanor Prosser, *Hamlet and Revenge*, 2nd edn. (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1971), p. 188.

⁵Maurice Charney, “Shakespeare—and the Others,” *SQ* 30, no. 3 (Summer 1979): 328. Charney is discussing the relationship between Shylock and Marlowe’s Barabas.

and its moral squalor. Rather than simply demonstrating patterns of good and evil in morality fashion, revenge plays engage an audience in a conflict between the moral failure and aesthetic triumph of artful murder. The ways the tensions are developed and resolved affect our experience of the play and its meaning.

An examination of the violence in *The Revenger's Tragedy* may clarify this point about the effect of tone and style on audience response. Like Hamlet, Vindice feels compelled to set right a world out of joint. He is his play's chief moral spokesman and its most dexterous assassin. Because Vindice epitomizes the aesthetic revenger, the dramatic tensions created by witty violence define, to a great extent, our experience of the play. Like *Hamlet*, *The Revenger's Tragedy* is intensely poetic, but it assaults us with extreme, often comic violence. *The Revenger's Tragedy* shows that given the way art shapes and redefines experience, witty violence, far from having a moral impact, may engage an audience in amoral fantasies of destruction. *Hamlet* exploits our desire for the violent resolution of problems, but Shakespeare takes us through a series of images of decisive action to enforce our recognition that murder and revenge are ugly and reprehensible.

The Duke's murder in *The Revenger's Tragedy* seems judicious because the Duke secures the privacy for the killing and condemns himself by relishing sins "rob'd in holiness" (III.v.141).⁶ The moral pattern of sin and reward completes itself when, "in a perfumed mist" (144) provided by Vindice, the Duke kisses the painted lips of the skull of the woman he once poisoned for not consenting to his lust. The Duke poisoned his soul when he poisoned Gloriana, and now he feels himself to be in hell because, as he dies, he must watch his wife and bastard son cuckold him. The punishment aptly fits the crime, but Vindice's role as an agent of divine retribution remains ambiguous. He treats the Duke's anguish comically—"Nay, Heaven is just, scorns are the hire of scorns; / I ne'er knew yet adulterer without horns" (187-88)—but he insists on extreme suffering:

If he but wink, not brooking the foul object,
Let our two other hands tear up his lids,
And make his eyes, like comets, shine through blood;
When the bad bleeds, then is the tragedy good.
(III.v.202-205)

As Maurice Charney argues, with this last remark Vindice enunciates

⁶*The Revenger's Tragedy* is quoted from the Revels Plays edition, ed. R. A. Foakes (London: Methuen, 1966).

one of the principles upon which the violent action is based. The statement is full of artifice, because Vindice claims the moral support of the gods, who applaud enthusiastically "When the bad bleed."⁷ Ironically, "The more he applauds his own plotting as an approximation of the perfect logic and economy of God's, the more he undermines his claim to ethical integrity."⁸ The irony, however, does not elicit a simple moral judgment. As Vindice, through his actions, distances himself from moral concerns, he tends to take us with him.

The skull is the traditional *contemptus mundi* symbol of human frailty and transitory life. And so when Vindice enters "*with the skull of his love dressed up in tires [and masked]*" (III.v.43 s.d.), and then unmasks the "country lady" (134) to reveal his "bony lady" (121), he redefines traditional moral and tragic values with his art. He becomes a playwright, creating and manipulating lives, and meting out poetic justice without mercy or fear of censor. He playfully brings under control the terrible meanings of the skull:

Here's an eye
Able to tempt a great man—to serve God;
A pretty hanging lip, that has forgot now to dissemble:
Methinks this mouth should make a swearer tremble,
A drunkard clasp his teeth, and not undo 'em
To suffer wet damnation to run through 'em.
(III.v.54–59)

While pointing out the frailty of mankind, Vindice implies his own transcendence. His Gloriana, brought back to life by his invention, unites beauty and virtue: the pretty lip no longer deceives. Vindice has solved the problem Hamlet raises in his bitter conversation with Ophelia: that "the power of beauty will sooner transform honesty from what it is to a bawd than the force of honesty can translate beauty into his likeness" (III.i.111–14).

Vindice identifies with Gloriana's permanence. She has been freed from the vanities of cosmetics and the ravages of nature:

Here's a cheek keeps her colour, let the wind
Go whistle;
Spout rain, we fear thee not; be hot or cold,
All's one with us.
(III.v.60–63)

⁷Maurice Charney, "The Persuasiveness of Violence in Elizabethan Plays," *RenD* n.s. 2 (1969): 67.

⁸Felperin, p. 167.

It is as if Vindice parodies Lear on the heath: "Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks" (III.ii.1). Whereas Lear, in his reduction to "unaccommodated man" (III.iv.105–106), becomes one with nature, Vindice, in imaginative collaboration with his unassailable bony lady, triumphs over it.

Although Vindice "could e'en chide myself / For doting on her beauty" (III.v.69–70), it is not surprising that in his jocular *contemptus mundi* speeches he fails to realize "a full sense of the moral nature of his own actions."⁹ Having redefined his love for Gloriana, he fancies himself beyond human failing. His attitude affects the play's meaning because the moralizing gets deflected by the artifice. There is a strong sense of performance in the way Vindice concludes his sermon by turning the skull on the audience, and then abruptly switches to the "tragic business" (99) at hand. These histrionics create the dramatic context of the Duke's murder, and Hippolito directs our response by applauding Vindice's "constant vengeance, / The quaintness of thy malice, above thought" (108–109).

Vindice and Hippolito care less about the moral efficacy of the Duke's suffering than about its intensity and their freedom to inflict punishment. They mean "To stick" their victim's "soul with ulcers" and make his "spirit grievous sore" (III.v.175–76). In theory, this is the kind of psychological and spiritual affliction Hamlet seeks for Claudius in the prayer scene. In performance, as the Duke's murder shows, it yields vicious farce. As the poison eats into the Duke's mouth, Vindice and Hippolito revile him for his few teeth and sloppy kisses, as if physical infirmity and inept sexual technique are symptoms of moral decay. Hippolito answers the Duke's plea that he "call treason" (III.v.156) by working out a joke: "Yes, my good lord; treason, treason, treason!" (157), he says, while "*Stamping on him*" (157 s.d.). The literal response thwarts expectations, underscoring the Duke's hopelessness and the revengers' invulnerability. The killing is shockingly savage, especially when Hippolito nails down the Duke's tongue with his dagger, but it is made very funny, too, by the farce and verbal transformations. The bony lady's "grave look" (137), which at first so enticed the Duke, prevails sardonically throughout the scene, and the Duke's inability to endure the abuse spurs Vindice's wit:

Duke. I cannot brook— [Dies.]
 Vindice. The brook is turn'd to blood.
 Hippolito. Thanks to loud music.
 (III.v.222–23)

⁹Foakes, *The Revenger's Tragedy*, p. xxxii.

The jokes are more outrageous and disorienting in performance than in reading because they are delivered in full conflict with the visual ferocity of the stage action.

The killing is too savage to demonstrate comfortably the punishment of sin and too comic to comment nicely on the immorality of revenge. Moreover, the savage farce gets qualified by the exotic theatricality of the decorated skull, torchlight, perfumed mist, and the Duchess and Spurio's lascivious banquet, the floor show in Vindice's entertainment. The artistry gives the murder scene its dramatic impact and meaning. Vindice may delude himself with his feelings of artistic omnipotence, but the effect of the moral delusion is not as compelling as the effect of the illusion of the perfect revenge. Everything conspires to ensure the success of the revenge. Here, as in the slaughter which ends the play, the metaphysical rightness of the irony suggests the work of heaven.¹⁰ But here, as in the end when Vindice's masquers arrive first to kill Lussurioso, leaving the second band of masquers to puzzle over the devastation, squabble, and then kill one another, it is Vindice, not heaven, who is most immediately responsible. The marvel of the Duke's murder is that Vindice makes it happen the way it does by seizing on an opportunity and wittily exploiting characters and circumstances.

The murder has the violence and moral compromise of reality, the artifice of play, and the exoticism and wish fulfillment of dream. It is funny and painful, but above all it is fantastic. The grotesque comedy does not just function to make a terrible "vision of human cruelty through ingenuity bearable."¹¹ The grisly humor is fundamental to our experience of the play because it puts us in touch with the incredulous and the impossible. Vindice has the appeal of the comic artist who escapes constraint and beats adversity with his wit. Craft, not morality, distinguishes Vindice from his enemies, and the play's structure emphasizes the importance of the distinction. The comic failure of Ambitioso and Supervacuo's attempt to save their junior brother and have Lussurioso executed frame Vindice's success. The comedy reflects their absolute lack of control. Whereas Vindice is free to gloat after his witty deception—"The dukedom wants a head, though yet unknown; / As fast as they peep up, let's cut 'em down" (III.v.225-26)—Supervacuo and Ambitioso are left with Junior's severed head to mock their ineptitude.

Because of the way Vindice maintains the "vision of universal corruption" that Hamlet projects in his moments of despair, D. L. Frost sug-

¹⁰M. C. Bradbrook, *Themes and Conventions of Elizabethan Tragedy* (1935; rpt. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1969), pp. 165-66.

¹¹Foakes, "The Art of Cruelty," p. 29.

gests that “*The Revenger’s Tragedy* might have been written by Hamlet.”¹² The relationship is interesting in another, less scholarly way. Vindice’s aesthetic, amoral ferocity frees him from the feelings of oppression that burden revengers like Hamlet and Hieronimo. Seen this way, *The Revenger’s Tragedy* is a wish-fulfilling fantasy of annihilation, the kind of savagely just illusion of retribution and artistic control an imaginative revenger, debilitated by self-doubt, might conjure up.

In an extraordinary elaboration of the revenge play conventions, Vindice manages to kill his enemy, the head of state, a second time and in public. In a scene reminiscent of *The Jew of Malta*, Vindice and Hippolito dress the Duke in Piato’s clothes, prop up the body as if “Piato” is drunk asleep, and await Lussurioso’s command to attack the corpse. It is common for a revenger to be divided against himself, because in seeking revenge he must, in Hamlet’s words, “couple hell” (I.v.93). Here Vindice literally confronts his villainous alter ego in Piato, but he delights in the dual role: “Brother, that’s I; that sits for me; do you mark it? And I must stand ready here to make away myself yonder—I must sit to be killed, and stand to kill myself” (V.i.4–7). Vindice solves his identity problem histrionically, and his delight in the game engages us in the fun of the play. The violence of the second murder of the Duke, rather than horrifying us with gratuitous slaughter, contributes to the comic release from conventional moral restraints. Vindice’s revenge “hits / Past the apprehension of indifferent wits” (133–34). What might be an enormous psychological and moral problem is for Vindice no problem at all. Try as he might, Hamlet never achieves this kind of release, and Shakespeare never lets us take murder lightly.

Hamlet is as witty as any revenger, and for a while he is as willing to kill. He may not mean to kill Polonius when he stabs through the arras, but he means to kill someone, evidently Claudius, as he would “A rat” (III.iv.25). He enjoys his cleverness—the success of *The Mousetrap* so transports him that he breaks into mad song—and after he kills for the first time he begins to delight in the knavish game of survival, “For ’tis the sport to have the enginer / Hoist with his own petar” (III.iv.207–208). He seems especially pleased with the new commission he devises to send Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths, “Not shriving time allowed” (V.ii.47). But Horatio does not share Hamlet’s enthusiasm—“So Guildenstern and Rosencrantz go to’t” (56) is all he remarks—and Hamlet’s defense of the trick stresses the seriousness and intensity of the “sport”:

¹²D. L. Frost, *The School of Shakespeare: The Influence of Shakespeare on English Drama 1600–1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1968), pp. 41–42.

'Tis dangerous when the baser nature comes
Between the pass and fell incensèd points
Of mighty opposites.

(V.ii.60–62)

The fencing metaphor keeps the conflict between Hamlet and Claudius within the context of sport, but the weapons are angry, like the antagonists. The passion and magnitude of the duel push it beyond the safe and predictable bounds of sport. The final emphasis is not on the cleverness of Hamlet's device, but on the more brutal fact of death. Just as Polonius "find'st to be too busy is some danger" (III.iv.34), so Rosencrantz and Guildenstern meddle too far, and "go to't." The victims' culpability does not exonerate Hamlet, but it does indicate the cold-blooded and fatal nature of the intrigue. At this late point in the play Hamlet is not planning any specific revenge against Claudius, but he still wonders if it is "not perfect conscience / To quit him with this arm" (V.ii.67–68). Hamlet now understands that "There's a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will" (10–11), but he also knows that "a man's life's no more than to say 'one'" (74). It only takes one sword thrust to end a life.

This tough attitude toward death and killing is felt throughout the play. Shakespeare keeps us engaged in the conflict by presenting Hamlet as having confused values and by playing off the emerging violence against the words. The violence and moral confusion give us a perspective on the action Hamlet sometimes lacks and prevents us from being too sympathetic with Hamlet's homicidal desires. Just before Hamlet leaves for England he rebukes himself for yet living to say, "This thing's to do" (IV.iv.44), and compares himself to young Fortinbras. Fortinbras, the renegade who early in the play is reported to be sharking "up a list of lawless resolute" (I.i.98), becomes in Hamlet's eyes "a delicate and tender prince" whose spirit is "with divine ambition puffed" (IV.iv.48–49). Hamlet's muddled vision of heroic conduct results in a puzzling equation of "capability and godlike reason" (38) with an eagerness to kill, and "Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple / Of thinking too precisely on th' event" (40–41), with a "dull revenge" (33), a failure to kill. This peculiar thinking extends the moral confusion evident in the "To be or not to be" soliloquy, in which Hamlet equates conscience with cowardice.

Hamlet uses Fortinbras's example of "honor" in the same way he uses the Player's impassioned recitation of Aeneas's tale to Dido to measure his own lack of passion and to arrive at a vow to take action. Compared to the Player, who in a fiction can work up great feeling, Hamlet sees himself as "A dull and muddy-mettled rascal" (II.ii.578), an inept, cowardly stage villain who passively suffers the humiliation of having his

beard plucked and his nose tweaked. The Player's make-believe passion heightens and justifies the emotional need for Hamlet to seek resolution in honest feeling and decisive action, but the viciousness of the alternative undercuts the image of action. If Hamlet did not "lack gall / To make oppression bitter," by now he would have "fatted all the region kites / With this slave's [i.e., Claudius's] offal" (588-91).

Tourneur uses Vindice's self-conscious artistry to evoke a sense of fantastic release, but Shakespeare uses Hamlet's consciousness of art and the theater to promote a sense of the horror of murder. Like the play-within-the-play, the Player's speech on Priam's slaughter helps to define the reality of Hamlet's situation. Both pieces follow the play's basic pattern of murder and revenge, and both emphasize the similarity between murder and revenge.¹³ The distinct artifice of Aeneas's tale to Dido and of *The Murder of Gonzago* makes the conflict between Hamlet and Claudius more real and immediate for us by breaking down barriers between the audience and the characters onstage. But more than making the primary action more real and powerful, the distancing effect of the artifice promotes a critical response to the idea of murder. It is one thing to enjoy murder plays and tales of reckless heroism, but it is something else to kill someone. To make the difference felt, Shakespeare gradually brings the violence onstage. The stories get played off against the effective illusion of real violence, and the audience's experience becomes more direct and painful.

Like the Ghost's report of King Hamlet's murder, the Player's recitation of Priam's slaughter depends on narration for its effect. The story of Pyrrhus is grisly enough, but we are protected from the substantive horror of the tale by its antiquity and stylization, and by the comments of Hamlet and Polonius. Revenge remains an image in a thrilling classical story. *The Murder of Gonzago* presents a more modern, less heroic murder story than Aeneas's tale to Dido. Revenge becomes less of an idea, because *The Mousetrap* is Hamlet's initial assault on Claudius, and the idea of murder becomes more real, because Lucianus's poisoning of his uncle Gonzago visualizes the act. Although *The Mousetrap* is too stylized to be persuasive, it works effectively in its dramatic context to demonstrate how inadequately murder is depicted in an old-fashioned play. Hamlet emphasizes the gulf between fiction and reality by insisting that the players "do but jest, poison in jest; no offence i' th' world" (III.ii.238-39). The implication of Hamlet's sardonic aggression is that Claudius, who cannot have a clear conscience, should be terrified. If real violence is so much worse than mere play acting, or poisoning in jest, then Hamlet is that much more frightening than Lucianus. Hamlet is not an Italian fiction.

¹³Nigel Alexander, *Poison, Play, and Duel: A Study in "Hamlet"* (Lincoln: Univ. of

When Hamlet kills for the first time he seems to be acting out a role, though he is not playing, at least not in the sense of poisoning in jest. After the success of *The Mousetrap* he declares that “Now could I drink hot blood / And do such bitter business as the day / Would quake to look on” (III.ii.398–400), lines which plunge us into the Hamlet world of Saxo Grammaticus, “where the timely epic boast is needed to establish the protagonist’s manly claims.”¹⁴ In the role of the swaggering Danish hero Hamlet stabs Polonius, as if on a wager:

How now? A rat? Dead for a ducat, dead!
Makes a pass through the arras and kills Polonius.
 (III.iv.25)

The gambler’s reductive boast — the victim is only worth one ducat — causes Polonius’s murder to seem “a meaningless and insignificant act” which “mocks the heroic pretensions of Hamlet’s role as revenger.”¹⁵ The staging also denies the heroic significance of the killing, as Hamlet stabs blindly through the arras. The “rat,” the “mighty opposite,” turns out to be a “wretched, rash, intruding fool” (32) mistaken for his better. But although the killing has little significance as an act of revenge, it has important dramatic meaning for the audience because the lethal violence has begun. We are partially protected from its horror because we only see Hamlet stab through the arras, not directly into Polonius’s body. But we hear the body hit the floor, and we see it, and perhaps the surprised look on Polonius’s face, when Hamlet lifts the curtain to see whom he has hit.

As audience, we learn more about the horror of murder and revenge than Hamlet. Even after he claims to repent for Polonius, his victim remains a mass of “guts” to be lugged “into the neighbor room” (III.iv.213). That the killing of Polonius has little meaning to Hamlet or the Ghost intensifies its residual impact. The Ghost exhorts Hamlet to save his mother, which seems a positive gesture, but its “visitation / Is but to whet [Hamlet’s] almost blunted purpose” (111–12). This is a curious thing to say to someone whose sword is still red with blood. It is this kind of thinking that makes the conclusion of Hamlet’s “How all

Nebraska Press, 1971), p. 95. Alexander talks incisively about how *The Murder of Gonzago*, by replaying Claudius’s murder of King Hamlet and projecting Hamlet’s murder of Claudius, allows the audience to look before and after, and thus provokes questions of justice and moral interpretation (pp. 102; 115–16).

¹⁴Maurice Charney, “The ‘Now Could I Drink Hot Blood’ Soliloquy in *Hamlet*,” *Mosaic* 10, no. 3 (Spring 1977): 80.

¹⁵Charney, “Now Could I Drink Hot Blood,” p. 84.

occasions do inform against me" soliloquy so disturbing, and which deflates the heroic image embodied in King Hamlet and kept alive in young Fortinbras. It becomes clear that the effect of revenge is to belittle life, not to glorify it in the name of honor.

The appearance of Laertes as a hot-blooded revenger helps to save Hamlet as a worthy hero, but more than that it extends the dramatic investigation of murder and revenge as human actions. Laertes' actions improve our perspective on Hamlet's desires by making more explicit the moral contamination of his bloody thoughts. Laertes would "cut his [victim's] throat i' th' church" (IV.vii.126), which is no more lethal, but is more blasphemous, than taking the victim in an act "That has no relish of salvation in 't." Using Laertes allows Shakespeare to explore the nature of reckless and aesthetic revenge, but this time with a victim about whom the audience cares. Caring for the victim involves us more directly in the action, making the crime seem more horrible and less of a vicarious thrill.

Impulsiveness and aesthetics are linked in Laertes' revenge by the way Claudius defuses Laertes' rebellion with his quick, politic thinking. Claudius's easy duping of Laertes undercuts the heroic image of the passionate revenger and makes it clear "that passion alone would not take Hamlet very far in the battle against such a 'mighty opposite.'" ¹⁶ The conspiracy scene between Claudius and Laertes extends the implied criticism to cunning revenge of the sort that Hamlet contemplates in the prayer scene and that concludes many revenge plays. Claudius's "device" (IV.vii.64) of a rigged fencing match is not strikingly artistic by revenge play standards, but it is aesthetic in the sense that it is designed to disguise the act of murder so that even Hamlet's "mother shall uncharge the practice / And call it accident" (67-68).

There is something of the spirit of quaint murder in this dark, energetic conspiracy, but we are not diverted by imaginative or witty opportunism, or even by a sense of a wild sort of justice. The success of the device depends on Laertes being gullibly eager to kill and Hamlet "being remiss, / Most generous, and free from all contriving" (IV.vii.134-35). The victim will suffer for his virtues, not his vices, and as a consequence the plot seems mean and low. Disguised as sport, but fought with a poisoned, unbated rapier and seconded with poisoned wine, the duel fuses in action the images and themes of poison, play, combat, appetite, and deception developed throughout the play. But although the duel is

¹⁶G. K. Hunter, "The Heroism of Hamlet," in *Hamlet*, Stratford-upon-Avon Studies 5 (London: Edward Arnold, 1963), pp. 97-98.

a complex symbolic action, its emotional appeal is simple and direct. Shakespeare creates the dramatic illusion of real, meaningful violence by playing off the deaths against the ritual of sport. In this respect, the fencing match is like the killing masques popular in revenge tragedies. The elaborate artifice of the entertainment ensures the impact of the violence that unexpectedly erupts. But we know the duel is rigged, and so can anticipate the fatal outcome. Our sympathy is with the intended victim who, despite a sense of foreboding, thinks he is taking his daily exercise. Instead of being diverted by imaginative, startlingly devastating extensions of art, we experience the violent collapse of civilized order.

The duel is staged with all the pomp that Claudius's court can muster, as "*A table*" is "*prepared*," and to the sounds of "*Trumpets*" and "*Drums*" "*Officers with cushions*" enter, followed by the "*King, Queen, . . . and all the State*" (V.ii.227 s.d.). The fanfare and spectacle shatter the stillness that follows Hamlet's acceptance of providence: "The readiness is all. Since no man of aught he leaves knows, what is't to leave betimes? Let be" (224–26). The effect of the scene depends on this juxtaposition of moods, on the suspense and spectacle of the highly wagered duel, and on the clash between illusion and reality: what the duel appears to be, what the conspirators intend it to be, and what it turns out to be. As an athletic contest between two nobles, it should be a ritualized entertainment involving skill and fortune. The conspirators intend it to be a fixed act that mocks fortune. But Hamlet wins the bouts, Gertrude unheedingly quenches her thirst, Claudius unchivalrously lets her die, and the combatants, after Laertes desperately strikes Hamlet, become incensed. The "*scuffling*" (304 s.d.), in which "*they change rapiers*" (304 s.d.) and Hamlet wounds Laertes, contrasts with the discipline and seeming propriety of the first three bouts. Though simple, the device effectively visualizes the collapse of order. The heraldic pomp gives way to cries of "Treachery!" (314) as Gertrude falls, and of "Treason!" (325) as Hamlet stabs Claudius and forces the poisoned wine down his throat: "Here, thou incestuous, murd'rous, damnèd Dane, / Drink off this potion. Is thy union here?" (V.ii.327–28). Hamlet's pun on the king's "union," the "union" (274), or pearl, meant for Hamlet as the victor in the first bout, reminds us of Hamlet's aspirations as a witty revenger, but it is too bitter to mitigate the savagery of the killing.

Because Hamlet requites himself well against overwhelming odds, his duel seems as heroic as his father's with Old Fortinbras, and he earns a soldier's honors.¹⁷ We can agree with Laertes that Claudius "is justly

¹⁷Mark Rose, *Shakespearean Design* (Cambridge: Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1972), p. 124.

served" (V.ii.329), and we can be pleased that before they die Hamlet and Laertes reconcile. But there is little that is heroic about the violence, and the outcome of the duel yields little satisfaction. The sudden, naked violence suggests that the control civil order has over destructive violence is tenuous. Like the "sport," it seems to be an illusion. The reality is revealed in the violence, which in the final scene is quick, cheap, and reductive. Even Hamlet's killing of Claudius, however passionate and understandable it may be, is painfully ugly. The catastrophic violence is the immediate source of the "woe or wonder" (365) which stuns the "mutes or audience to this act" and makes them "look pale and tremble" (336-37), and which appalls the warlike Fortinbras. The pile of corpses looks to Fortinbras like the bloody aftermath of an overzealous hunt. It is out of place in court, the supposed seat of law and order.

Mortally wounded, Hamlet insists that Horatio live, "And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain, / To tell my story" (V.ii.350-51). He accepts death with some regret because he wants his conduct and his "cause" to be reported "aright / To the unsatisfied" (341-42), so that his name and honor survive unsullied. Life achieves meaning and value, though its worth is measured by the pain we feel at the waste of the carnage. As Robert Ornstein puts it, Hamlet "dies just when he is ready to embrace life, when his cloud of melancholy has lifted and he stands before us the very quintessence of dust."¹⁸ Vindice embraces death, especially once it is clear that he will get credit for the "strangeliest carried" (V.iii.94) murder of the Duke. To Vindice's way of thinking, the murder was "somewhat witty carried, though we say it" (97), and death seems a small price for the fame after death of an artist:¹⁹ "This murder might have slept in tongueless brass, / But for ourselves, and the world died an ass" (V.iii.113-14).

Popular forms of literature exploit an audience's notions about legitimate and illegitimate violence, violence which purges evil and violence which reflects outrageous villainy.²⁰ The difference may be illusory, created by the rhetorical and dramatic context, and it may deny the richly ambiguous impact of stage violence. Revenge plays build on a

¹⁸Robert Ornstein, *The Moral Vision of Jacobean Tragedy* (1960; rpt. Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1965), p. 237.

¹⁹Charney suggests that in trying to rescue his brilliant exploits from oblivion, Vindice "is only echoing the noble sentiments of Shakespeare's sonnets": "Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea, / But sad mortality o'ersways their power" (Sonnet 65). "The Persuasiveness of Violence," p. 68.

²⁰John G. Cawelti discusses the notion of legitimate and illegitimate violence in popular literature in *The Six-gun Mystique* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green Univ. Popular Press, 1971), pp. 23-24; 56-61; 83-85.

tension between the aesthetic and emotional appeal of witty, wild justice, and the horror of violence. The violence in *The Revenger's Tragedy* assaults our moral sensibilities, but its diverting ingenuity reflects an enviable power. Though more complex, Vindice is like Harry Callahan, the Clint Eastwood character in the police detective movie *Dirty Harry*. Harry's violent games and brutal disregard for legal rights offend our liberal consciences and appeal in disturbing ways to our desires to be invulnerable in a gratuitously violent and corrupt society. But when Harry stands on the overpass, silhouetted against the sun, ready to pounce on the killer-extortionist, he is Natty Bumppo, and his image is as mythic as the American West. Similarly, Vindice is a mythic Elizabethan-Italian revenger whose delight in quaint retributive murder frees him and his audience from conventional moral constraints. His posture becomes increasingly self-conscious, like the art that gives it expression, until the play resolves the tension between ethics and aesthetics through fantasy.

In part, *Hamlet* builds on a simple but powerful conflict produced in the audience between desire for strong action and revulsion from violence. Hamlet achieves tragic stature, but only by not fulfilling the traditional heroic and revenging roles the play offers for mimesis. More than serving as a substitute for immoral violent action, Hamlet's artistry helps to define the horror of real murder and revenge. We are made to see in the stage action that the roles of the decisive figures, the heroes in Hamlet's images of violent action—Pyrrhus, Lucianus, Fortinbras, Laertes, and even King Hamlet—are savage and therefore tainted. On one level at least, the power of the play derives from the way Hamlet's experience forces the audience to confront the squalor of violence, which becomes increasingly real and painful as the play progresses. Rather than indulging an audience's fantasies about justice and heroic action, *Hamlet* offers and then denies the popular ways of resolving the conflicts inherent in "Murder most foul, as in the best it is."